

How I have come to understand “open data”: A reflection

Blog post by Sibongile Musundwa
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What is Open Data?

I was somewhat of a newcomer to all things open before becoming a member of the OpenUCT team. I had a vague idea about the willingness to share resources and information, although I had not fully linked these concepts to openness movements such as open access and open educational resources. Open data was even more of a foreign concept. I had some broad knowledge of “open” and experience with “data” but I had no idea what to expect when these two words were put together.

So what then is open data? The [Open Definition](#) states:

“A piece of data or content is open if anyone is free to use, reuse, and redistribute it - subject only, at most, to the requirement to attribute and/or share-alike”.

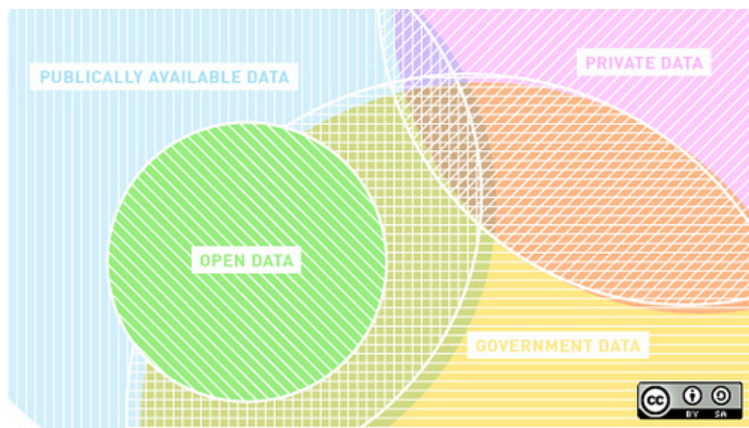
That seems simple enough. But what are some of the reasons for making data open: Why should governments, researchers and others make data available? To start, open data may bring about greater transparency in government, holding key actors accountable (Davies et al, 2013). Another reason would be to release social and commercial value. Since data is the key resource in several social and commercial activities, opening up access to data can be a driver of innovative business and services (OKFN, 2014). Finally there is the social domain where imbalances due to asymmetric information can be removed, allowing citizens and other stakeholders to be more informed and directly involved in decision making (Davies et al, 2013).



Ensuring that the Open Definition holds entails a few other things. In my work on the [Open Data in the Governance of South African Higher Education](#) project (as part of the larger [Exploring the Emerging Impacts of Open Data in Developing Countries](#)) I have come across two checklists that aim to facilitate an outcome similar to the Open Definition. The ODDC project is developing a 10-point evaluation, within the context of governance and developing countries, which is currently only available within the network. The other set of principles guide Open Government Data, focussing on transparency and accountability, and can be found [online](#). These 8 principles, also known as the Sebastopol Principles of Open Government Data, can be summarised as follows:

- Data must be complete
- Data must be primary
- Data must be timely
- Data must be accessible
- Data must be machine readable
- Access must be non-discriminatory
- Data formats must be non-proprietary
- Data must be license-free

These criteria are a very useful guide for any individual, project, organisation or government department wanting to make data publicly available for use, reuse and redistribution in the most efficient manner. However, there are already some discussions coming out of the ODDC network regarding whether the Open Definition and principles such as these alienate and disregard some initiatives making information publicly available. For example, how does an initiative releasing budget information in newspapers every quarter measure up? The ODDC's [Uganda case study](#) encountered something similar, arguing that there should be room to go beyond the Open Definition.



Sometimes there are issues with terminology. For example, the terms "publicly available" or "public use" data are sometimes more recognisable than "open data". This was actually the case with me, being exposed to data released under varying licenses during my studies and work but not once coming across the concept of open data. I can, however, see that the "open data" concept tries to extend the idea of making information available to the public to the point where it can be easily made use of and adapted, which is why ICTs are so easily tied into it. Beyond that the hope is for dynamic circulation of data such that it can facilitate not only active citizenry but also drive innovation, at the social level and business level.

For more information and resources on open data, visit the [Open Knowledge Foundation's Open Data](#) page. To get an idea of what an open data platform or initiative looks like visit [Open Data for Africa](#) and [CHET](#) as a start. And finally, to keep up to date with OpenUCT's work around the emerging impacts of open data in developing countries visit our project page [here](#).

References:

- Davies, T., Perini, F. & Alonso, J.M. 2013. *Researching the emerging impacts of open data: ODDC conceptual framework*. July 2013. ODDC Working Papers #1. Available: <http://www.opendataresearch.org/sites/default/files/posts/Researching%20the%20emerging%20impacts%20of%20open%20data.pdf> [2014, 3 February]

- Open Knowledge Foundation. *Why Open Data?* <http://okfn.org/opendata/> [Accessed: 2014, 29 January]

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Submitted by Umfundi Wobomi on Fri, 02/14/2014 - 12:02

I'm glad I came across your post. It's a good introduction to the subject and I'll be following the developments on OpenUCT.

I'm curious about open data in the context of information for prospective students (e.g. criteria for admission) which is readily available online, what do you think it will take to expose these as services for software developers to use in creating education-focused information products?

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